

The Associated Press

HEADLINE: Bird flu spreads to the small screen in bid to scare up TV ratings

BYLINE: By ANDREW BRIDGES, Associated Press Writer

Bodies piling up so quickly it takes dump trucks to haul them away. Barbed wire to keep whole neighborhoods quarantined. It's Hollywood's version of bird flu, a blur of fact and fiction that some scientists say could confuse the public.

"Fatal Contact: Bird Flu in America," an ABC made-for-television movie, airs May 9, just as scientists are to begin testing of wild birds in Alaska that could herald the arrival of bird flu in North America. Scientists fear the bird flu virus could evolve so it could be passed from human to human, sparking a global pandemic.

The two-hour movie plays up that notion to the fullest, with a running ticker that tallies tens of millions of victims worldwide. In one scene, the bodies are thrown on a pyre, like the carcasses of cows torched in the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Great Britain. The producers of the movie, from the writer of 2002's "Atomic Twister," bill their work as a "thinking man's disaster film."

"We call this a plausible, worst-case scenario. This could actually happen. It may not be this bad but it could be this bad. The reason to portray it this way is to kind of give a wake-up call to everyone and this is something we shouldn't ignore and we should be as prepared as we should be," said Diana Kerew, one of the movie's executive producers.

Bird flu expert Michael Osterholm said the movie realistically portrays the shortages of goods and services, and some of the ensuing panic, that could occur in a pandemic. But Osterholm frets the blurring of information and entertainment could do the public a disservice and hopes to arrange a conference call with television critics before the movie airs to set the record straight. He singled out for criticism how the movie shows Virginia officials using barbed wire to fence off and quarantine entire neighborhoods.

"This is too far important an issue to create further confusion in the public's mind," said Osterholm, who directs the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota.

For the record, a spokesman for Virginia Gov. Tim Kaine said the commonwealth has no plans to roll out cyclone fences and barbed wire. "We haven't done that since, oh, the '50s," joked Kevin Hall.

"Fatal Contact" begins in China, where in the movie the bird flu virus has mutated to the point where it's being passed human to human. It's only when an American businessman "patient zero" prepares to catch a flight out of Hong Kong, after crossing paths with an infected factory worker, that the global pandemic really gets started. Playing supporting roles are a wadded-up cocktail napkin, stuffed olive and an apparently less-than-sterile martini.

The movie suggests the Richmond, Va., businessman infects several dozen airline passengers, who scatter around the globe. Viewers may never accept a hot towel from a flight attendant again.

Health officials catch on quickly, but apparently are slow to tell the rest of us. At least two weeks pass before the president bothers to let on that it's the 1918 flu pandemic all over again.

That apparently didn't faze the dozen or so Department of Health and Human Services officials who screened the film at the request of The Associated Press.

Dr. Bruce Gellin, director of the National Vaccine Program office, praised the movie's timeliness in raising public awareness of bird flu, as well as its portrayal of "a number of potentially realistic scenarios." Those include the limited availability of antiviral medicines in a pandemic, the months it could take to develop an effective vaccine and in turn how the United States could be dependent on other countries yes, that means France to provide vaccine. The movie's stressing of the importance of planning also won kudos from the department.

ABC will broadcast the movie during sweeps, when networks often trot out scare fare to boost the ratings that help determine local advertising rates. The network isn't pushing "Fatal Contact" hard but has played up the bona fides of the movie, which it claims was "meticulously researched."

"There's a lot of science in the movie about why this would be scary if this were to arrive. Unfortunately, in our scenario, it is too late to stop the spread and that is what is being predicted by scientists if this were to occur," said Judith Verno, who co-produced the movie with Kerew for Sony Pictures Television.

The filmmakers even brought in historian John Barry, author of the best-selling book "The Great Influenza: The Epic Story of the Deadliest Plague in History," to review the script and make suggestions. Barry, in a telephone interview, said his involvement was much more limited than ABC has suggested. He did, however, dissuade them from showing the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as having its own fleet of jets.

"I have some problems with it," Barry said. "It's certainly not a documentary."